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"We are not going to prosecute you, we want your records and stories"

Filling apartheid gaps in the public memory of the Namibian struggle for independence

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ABSTRACT

Namibia gained independence in 1990 after over 100 years of colonial rule and a prolonged and bitter liberation struggle. The National Archives of Namibia has been tasked to recover evidence of this historical past, by identifying and repatriating archival records which are scattered worldwide, and by collecting oral evidence on the country's liberation struggle which has not been documented. The paper examines the difficulties encountered and the problems of documenting a violent past while at the same time promoting peace and reconciliation.

In countries like Namibia, where the wounds of a violent past are still fresh, collecting memories of the people who were involved in controversial acts is a delicate task. However, the Namibian AACRLS (Archives of Anti-Colonial Resistance and the Liberation Struggle) Project under the auspices of the National Archives of Namibia is going to do it, with respect to those who want their stories to be protected and out of the public sphere for the next decades. How do we solve this matter? How to get the history collected, but kept closed from access for a certain time, while on the other hand there are legitimate demands not only by historians who want to do academic research, but also by victims or their families? What about opening wounds again while one of the cornerstones of the peaceful development of Namibia since its independence 13 years ago is the policy of national reconciliation without settling old scores? And what about civil society demands for open access to information? To strike the delicate balance between these antagonistic demands remains a challenge.

Not that this is new or unique to Namibia. Such have been the challenges of the archivist profession for any country emerging from violent conflicts and oppressive regimes, and they have been dealt

with in many different ways, and each one is instructive. That is why I am going to present the Namibian case here.

As Namibia emerged from apartheid in March 1990, it soon realized that in its quest for its very own road of traveling from apartheid to a democratic country, important questions need to be answered: Who am I? Where do I come from? before asking: Where am I heading to? This precisely is the point where the importance of knowing and understanding our history become obvious for all who wish to see the Namibian nation develop on a solid base of common identity and values. The National Archives of Namibia became the focal point where some of these questions could get answers, but the information available there was incomplete and one-sided, recording the actions and viewpoints of the colonial government only. The actions and viewpoints of the organised resistance of the Namibian people, let alone the experience of simple person on the street, could only at times, and one-sidedly, be conjectured from these records. Further questions were asked that: What evidence of our lives and work will we leave to the future generation? How can we make sure that the archives truly represent the Namibian society in all its diversity?

And, Namibia having been a colony for over hundred years, there is also another dimension if one wants to get a full historical picture. Politics and administration of a colony are inextricably linked to the colonial power, whose records are just as important in understanding the forces and policies that shaped the colony. Decisions on crucially important issues, such as the land issue, the allocation of mining concessions, racial legislation, economic policies, were taken not in the colony but at the seat of colonial power. The forces and decision-making processes behind these must be understood when it comes to redressing wrongs of the past, changing policies, amending and repealing laws, but we do not have the records about these issues.

The Colonial Legacy

Record Administration under the Germans

The German Empire, which had taken possession of Namibia, the then South West Africa, from 1884-1915, set up a proper registry and filed their administrative documents with German thoroughness. When Germany lost the colony in the First World War, these documents were taken over and preserved by the South African administration, and today they form the much valued and much used core of the National Archives of Namibia.



German colonial files in the National Archives of Namibia

However, the documentation in Namibia cannot be fully understood without access to the documentation of the decision-making process in Germany, right here in Berlin, in the "Reichskolonialamt". That is why we are insisting that Namibia should have full access to the files in the colonial metropolis, that we should get microfilms of the relevant files from Berlin, even though some of the documents would just be a duplication of what we already have.

In the case of the colonial military, the case is different. It is well known that Germany conducted a genocidal war in Namibia between 1904-1908, an event of far-reaching consequences whose centenary will be commemorated next year. Almost all military records of this war are lost. We do not even know how much was destroyed before the surrender of German of German forces in Namibia, and how much was sent to Germany and perished in the bombing of the German military archives in Berlin during the Second World War. Research on this war has largely to rely on published sources, and on private papers which have survived the devastations of two world wars. And again, most of such private papers are found in Germany. We do hold a few manuscripts and diaries from colonial soldiers and officers, which have proven to be a substantial uncensored source of historical information. These are mostly from those who remained to settle in our country. But considering that more than 15 000 German soldiers and administrators were sent to Namibia, of whom many kept diaries, took photos, or wrote letters to their families, much more material must be available here in Germany – in family custody, in small town archives or local museums. We appeal to make such material, originals or copies, available to the National Archives of Namibia.

It is quite similar with the South African colonial administration from 1915 onwards.

Record Administration under apartheid South Africa

The management of records during the South African colonial period, which ultimately ended up in the National Archives of Namibia (formally established in 1939), was maybe more haphazard and less organised than during the German colonial period, but also left an impressive documentary trail. They created vast deposits of documents related to the day to day running of the country, but again, the political and policy decisions were taken in South Africa by various ministries, very often by deputy ministers in charge of Namibian affairs. These documents remained in South Africa. Later, when the struggle for Namibia's independence became a military matter, ever more decisions were taken in South Africa and more documents were classified "secret" and "top secret" and these were then kept in South Africa. The key documents of the last decade of South African rule, the records of the office of the Administrator General, a South African official vested with considerable powers by the South African Government, were even transferred from Namibia to South Africa when this office was closed on the eve of Namibian Independence, 21 March 1990. This transfer was illegal according to international rules of state succession, but during this transition the incoming Namibian government and the National Archives were just faced with already accomplished facts.

The same happened with the military records of the independence war. Even the records of the local component of the South African Defence Force, called SWATF, were removed to South Africa. And in the case of secret police files, we still have no clue whether they were destroyed in Namibia or transferred to South Africa.

The recording of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa reveals that, during the period between 1990-1994 huge volumes of public records were destroyed in an attempt to keep the apartheid state's darkest secrets hidden. The records of police surveillance activities and large quantities of documents confiscated from individuals and organizations opposed to apartheid were equally destroyed. This also refers to the South African secret police records. And, unlike in some

sudden revolutions, where the secret police of the old regime did not have time to destroy their records, the one-year-long UN-supervised Namibian transition process and the half decade between Nelson Mandela's release from prison and the first free elections in South Africa left the apartheid state machinery with plenty of time and opportunity to cover its tracks.

These documents, in as much as they form the memory of the colonial power's dealings with the Namibian people and were considered the rightful property of the colonial rulers as they documented the colonizing era of their history. As Namibia became of age and its people are able to speak for themselves, it is strongly argued that these records also constitute a part of their colonised history and have to be repatriated, in original or reproductions.

REPATRIATION OF NAMIBIA'S DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

The repatriation of displaced Namibian archival heritage become a crucial issue for the National Archives of Namibia, which developed out of the archival residue left behind by the colonial powers because the nature of transition to democracy meant that there would be no dramatic dismantling and reconstruction of the apartheid archival system. Rather the new would be built on the old through a process of transformation.

All attempts to get a commitment from the South African Government to supply the Namibian Archives with documents pertaining to Namibian issues were to no avail until the establishment of the new democratic South Africa in 1994.

A statement issued on 20 August 1997, by the South African Minister of Arts, Culture Science and Technology, Mr. Lionel Mtshali states with reference to the Administrator-General's records: "Those records were created in SWA-Namibia; they reflect a core aspect of the country's constitutional and socio-political history, and they constitute an integral part of the archival heritage of the people of Namibia (...) It is of further importance to state that the South African Cabinet discussed this matter and was of the opinion that, apart from the professional considerations of archival integrity, the motivation of confidentiality is no longer valid justification for keeping a section of the AG records in South Africa. South Africa is now an open democracy, subscribing to the principles of transparency and accountability in governance internally as well as at international level."

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South African Administrator-General's file

So, one issue of our missing records is being taken care of. We have already received back the Administrator-General's records, and hope that a corresponding solution can be found for the surviving military and security police files.

Internationally scattered resources

The history of Namibia is insofar rather unusual, as its history has more than any other country (except maybe Palestine) been shaped from outside. Not only by the two colonial powers, Germany and South Africa, but also by international forces surveilling, influencing, and counteracting the colonial power. This started with the League of Nations, whose records lie in Geneva, continued over time with the growing involvement of the United Nations, documented in the UN Archives at New York, and widened since the mid-1960s into a world-wide solidarity support movement, both of state and non-governmental players. Last but not least, a considerable proportion of Namibia's population went into exile where most of them lived not as mere refugees but actively involved in

the liberation struggle, and left a documentary trail worldwide from Australia to Canada, from Cuba to China, from Algeria to Zimbabwe. Millions of records of high relevance to Namibian history have been created abroad, and are now found scattered all over the world.

Their presence is needed in the country for historical research, for promoting a sense of nationhood, for promoting the government policy of national reconciliation and for educating the public and for the educational curriculum. It does not really matter whether they are in Spanish, Swedish, Swahili or Finnish - all these languages have been learned by Namibians in exile. Not to speak of German, which is even taught in a number of Namibian schools today.

But apart from these scattered international resources, we are struggling to preserve what we have at home, but is vanishing every day with the death of our old people - or even, in these times of AIDS, our not-so-old people. Their memories, their rich history runs the danger of getting lost, because many significant and important historical events are NOT recorded; neither are they preserved. "It has therefore become the urgent duty of all historians to listen carefully, to record accurately and research objectively; all those past historical events; as a clear sense of history, helps us all to understand the past; appreciates the present more meaningfully and informs our, sometimes, long walk into the future, more intelligibly", said our Minister of Basic Education and Culture at the inauguration of the AACRLS Project.



Meme Justina Amwaalwa, who told her experience as a woman arrested in Namibia and jailed in Pretoria

The AACRLS Project

This project was initiated when our President, on his state visit to Germany, expressed the wish to have the repatriation of historical materials to Namibia supported. This slowly shaped into the AACRLS concept through a series of consultations and workshops.

While all these efforts were going on, the Namibian government built and completed a spacious new National Archives and Library building that has created the possibility of housing a large volume of archives, and demonstrates the determination of the Namibian government to preserve

the records of the past. Therefore a sound basis to proceed with the repatriation of historical records has been laid.



The new National Archives of Namibia Building

AACRLS finally saw the light of day when the German-Namibian Government negotiations held in Windhoek in October 2001 agreed to jointly support this a project. An amount of DM 2.5 million (equivalent Euro 1.28 million) was made available for AACRLS over a period of three years. It was endorsed by the Namibian Cabinet, which instituted a Steering Committee of archivists, historians, and veterans of the struggle to run the project. The following main activities evolved:

- Repatriation of records which were illegally removed from Namibia
- Acquisition of copies of foreign government or missionary records and records of international organisations relating to Namibia
- Acquisition of originals or copies from foreign solidarity movements relating to Namibia
- Collection of historical records from private custody in Namibia
- Collection of oral history
- Empowering the National Archives to deal with all this material
- Reaching out into the Namibian community to create a historical awareness of the road to independence

Some experiences

In all the named areas, concrete steps have been taken and materials been collected. Involvement of the public has brought some spectacular results, such as finding the only existing photo of Kakurukaze Mungunda, a national hero who was shot by police in the protests against forced removals in 1959. It was brought by a relative, a farmer in a remote village, after he had listened to a radio programme on the project.



Kakurukaze Mungunda

It has, however, also become clear that the timeframe of three years is just enough to scratch the surface of the mass of records that should be retrieved. Luckily, and we are very grateful for that, further interest has been shown by other governments, such as Sweden and Finland, to assist in the repatriation effort from the Nordic countries, which have played an important role in supporting the independence struggle.

Another issue is that the retrieved material should not just be stored in the archives, but brought to the public eye. Not only for educating the public, but also for adding value to the material.

One example may illustrate this. We do already have a wealth of photographic material from exile. Namibians engaged in all kinds of activities in the refugee camps, education, construction work, military training, cultural activities, which are documented in these photos. But most of them were taken by foreign solidarity organisations, and moreover, in a war situation. They were not taken as historical documents, but as illustrations to popularise the solidarity activities. Therefore, in most cases, the names, dates, exact locations were not supplied. However, when these photos are exhibited, people come and recognise themselves and others, can identify the details, and moreover, have a story to tell about it.



Growing cabbage in Kwanza Sul refugee camp, Angola

Other material such as posters, United Nations passports, SWAPO marriage certificates, solidarity badges, T-shirts, any visually striking or "touchable" material is extremely valuable to aid the memory of the contemporaries, and to illustrate history for those generations who did not have the first-hand experience. Very much of this type of material is still around in private possession, but highly endangered by spring cleanings, house moves, death of the people who connected some sentimental value with it, and it should be collected and preserved.

The New Challenge

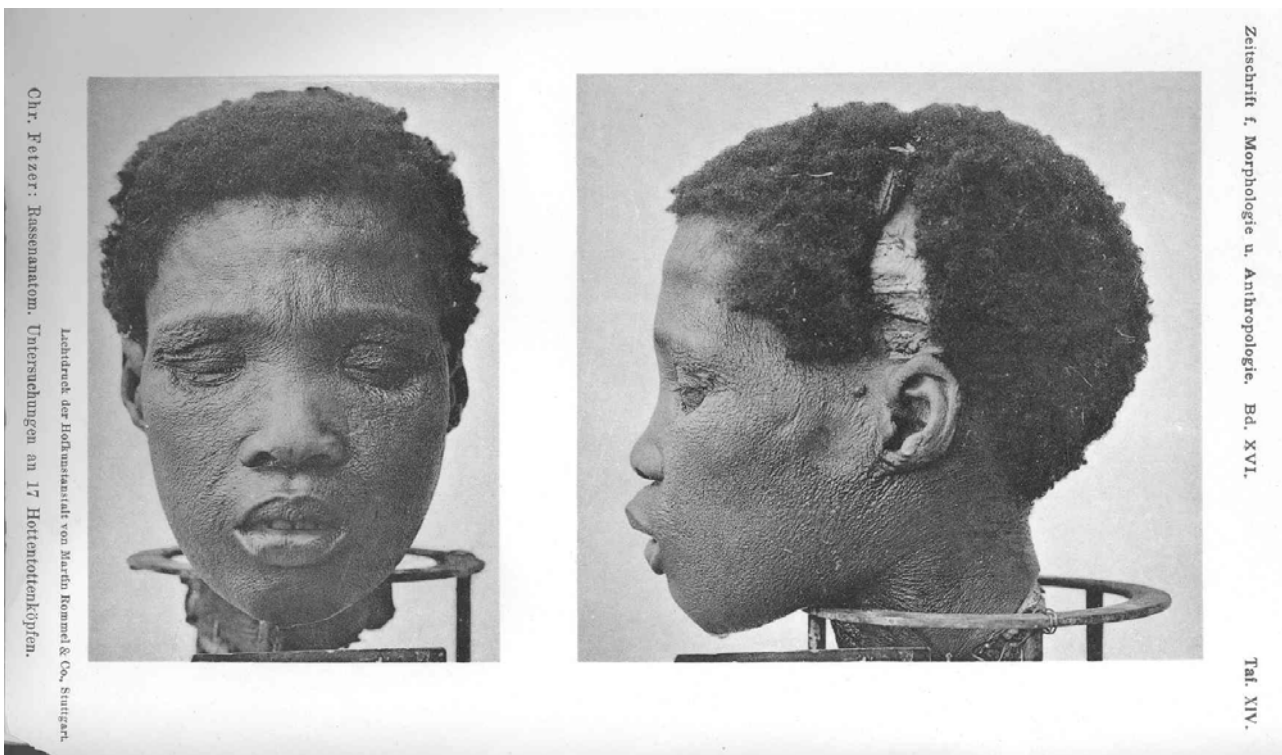
The project had carried out a number of oral interviews with persons who had direct experiences as prisoners of war, political prisoners, detention, war and exile. Some of these interviews contain information that implicate seriously citizens who were instruments of apartheid regime. Furthermore, some of the materials and personnel files returning from South Africa also implicate police officers who carried out most of the dirty work, killing civilians accused of assisting the freedom fighters, arresting, torturing and detaining. Some memories also record divisions within the liberation movement, an issue of particular bitterness as well as anxiety for those involved. For a country like Namibia which is just recovering from the wounds of the war, bringing back the fresh memory especially with evidence of who did what to whom may need extreme caution. Namibia is a small country of 1.7 million people and everyone almost knows everyone else.

While the effort of our project encourages that history must be told openly, we want to exercise sensitivity to avoid rekindling divisions of the past into divisions of tomorrow, to avoid ostracising individuals or even their families for being involved in actions of a regime that they did not create. Therefore we make sure that wishes of donors of documents and interview partners regarding a limited embargo on their material or interviews are fully respected. Regarding government material, we have a 30-year closed period during which any use must be duly authorised, and permission is subject to the judgment of the Head of Archives who should be qualified enough to take an ethically informed decision.

The struggle of remembering against forgetting

Ethics are an important issue also in other respects. It is certainly not a main focus of our efforts, but some documents that we came across convinced us that not only the return of documentary

material is of concern to Namibia. Reconciliation and coming to terms with the past can also be a matter of more symbolic gestures.



These photographs are taken from a scientific publication of 1913 and show the heads of Namibians who were killed or died in prison camps during the 1903-1908 war. There was a flourishing industry of taking skeletons and body parts to Germany for research in physical anthropology, a branch of science which later culminated in Mengele's experiments in Auschwitz. Oral tradition in Namibia frequently tells us of leaders whose heads were allegedly cut off and sent to Germany. While this may be difficult to prove in individual cases, the evidence is overwhelming that such things happened. Reconciliation also means that these human remains, whose removal was neither authorised by themselves nor by their families, be returned to their motherland and be given a decent burial, instead of remaining in museum cupboards as a memento to a discredited science. History is often unpleasant and some people may argue that reproducing these photographs may not contribute positively to the Namibian government policy of National Reconciliation. We strongly argue that the present is always a product of the past, and if the errors of the past are not exposed there is no guarantee that they would not be repeated. Let us give a voice to those silent skeletons in the cupboard, as well as to the many international anti-apartheid activists and organizations and the indigenous Namibians to document this history.